

Vermont State Board of Education

Position Statement on Assessment and Accountability

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Version 4

In recent years, federal educational reform has focused on the use of standardized tests and punitive consequences if a school's test scores did not improve at arbitrarily determined rates. While group test scores may provide some information to the public and policy-makers, the over-reliance and the misuse of standardized tests has led to significant harm by narrowing the broader purposes of public education and constricting our view of the diverse talents and attributes of children. Consequently, the state board issues this statement and adopts the following resolution to inform parents, students, educators, federal and state legislators, and the public regarding the proper role of testing in the education of our children.

The 2013-14 revision of the Vermont's Educational Quality Standards (EQS) includes fundamental skills but also embraces a broader definition of twenty-first century skills. These skills include democratic citizenship, cooperation, civic participation, and equality of opportunities. This means our accountability system must focus on the obligations of state, federal and local governments as well as the test performances of our children. Currently, the federal share of fiscal support (less than 10%) disproportionately influences Vermont policy:

1. Comprehensiveness and Validity - No single set of standardized tests is an adequate indicator of a child's, teachers,' school or state's educational attainment. Thus, any report on the quality of our educational system must be based on a diverse and valid set of indicators reflecting the broader purposes of education in a democratic society.
 - a. While some universal yet limited measures of basic knowledge are necessary, broader recognition of the disparate intelligences, skills and attributes of individual students must also be a major part of all schools' educational programs and their reports to the public.
 - b. Rank-ordering of schools or individuals by standardized test-score (or by overly-simplistic school grading schemes) is not a valid, comprehensive or ethical way of reporting results, and thus, this method will not be employed in the state.
 - c. No "high stakes" decision shall be made on the basis of standardized test results. This includes, but is not limited to evaluation decisions affecting students (such as graduation or promotion), teachers, schools or districts.

2. The Proper Role of Testing – The purpose of any large scale assessment must be clearly stated and the assessments must be scientifically and empirically validated and demonstrated for that purpose(s) prior to their use.
 - a. This requires external validation beyond professional judgment panels. In tests purporting to represent some sort of predictive power (e.g. – college and career ready), they must explicitly demonstrate they meet this criterion, using commonly accepted research evidence. While much is said about setting high expectations for students, it is essential that testing instruments be held to high standards as well.
 - b. True measures of the learning of children are best demonstrated in performance assessments. That is, realistic demonstrations of learned knowledge and skills which are not necessarily standardized along a common scale. Thus, the state board requests of the secretary of education that a broad performance base be employed in the evaluation of schools under the state’s Education Quality standards (EQS).
3. Public Reporting Requirement - It is a state and local obligation to report on the quality of the schools to the citizenry.
 - a. Standardized testing is part of this reporting obligation.
 - b. While federal policy currently requires excessive standardized testing in grades 3-8 and high school, a more balanced approach suggests standardized testing should be limited to at least one grade level but no more than two grade levels in each school. Standardized testing provides limited information to the public, does not consider important factors that influence scores, fails to provide useful diagnostic information to the school or the teacher, and consumes valuable instructional time.
 - c. The state board encourages local public reporting of a diverse and comprehensive set of school quality indicators in the EQS process as well as in local school, faculty and community communications.
4. Test Development Criteria - Any broad scale standardized assessment used in the state of Vermont must be developed and used appropriately in accord with the principles adopted by the AERA/NCME/ APA guidelines.
5. Value-added scores – Although the federal government is encouraging states to use value added scores for teacher, principal and school evaluations, this policy direction is neither scientifically valid nor ethically defensible. The current state of the art does not allow for valid calculation of “value-added” scores that compare pass rates from one year to the next. The effect of outside factors is great and the error rate is excessive rendering any conclusions to be invalid and unreliable. Available statistical techniques do not allow for accurately considering or sorting out unique school or teacher effects. Thus, other than for research or experimental purposes, this technique will not be employed in Vermont schools.

6. Mastery level or Cut-Off scores – While the federal government continues to require the use of arbitrarily determined, cut-off scores; employing such metrics is subjective and lacks scientific foundation. The skills needed for success in society are rich and diverse that there is no single point on a testing scale that has proven predictive of the success of a school or the measure of the talents of an individual. Claims to the contrary would not only be technically indefensible, their application would be unethical.

The use of cut-off scores is misleading to educators and policy-makers in that it reports findings only at one point on a statistical distribution. Scale scores provide significantly more information. They allow a more valid disaggregation of scores by sub-group, and a more comprehensive view of achievement gaps.

7. The State's Obligation for Adequacy and Equality of Opportunity – Much as the state must insure a high quality education for all children, the school must be provided with adequate and equitable resources from the federal, state and local governments. Thus, any report on a school based on the state's EQS standards must also include a report on the adequacy of resources provided by or to that school in light of the unique needs of that school. Such evaluations shall address the adequacy of resources and identify any deficiencies.

Consequently, the Vermont State Board of Education Adopts and Shall Disseminate this

Resolution on Assessment and Accountability

WHEREAS, our nation's future well-being relies on a high-quality public education system that prepares all students for college, careers, citizenship and lifelong learning, and strengthens the nation's social and economic well-being (1); and

WHEREAS, our nation's school systems have been spending growing amounts of time, money and energy on high-stakes standardized testing, in which student performance on standardized tests is used to make major decisions affecting individual students, educators and schools (2); and

WHEREAS, the overreliance on high-stakes standardized testing in state and federal accountability systems is undermining educational quality and equity in the nation's public schools by hampering educators' efforts to focus on the broad range of learning experiences that promote the innovation, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and deep subject-matter knowledge that will allow students to thrive in a democracy and an increasingly global society and economy (3); and

WHEREAS, it is widely recognized that standardized testing is an inadequate and often unreliable measure of both student learning and educator effectiveness (4); and

WHEREAS, the over-emphasis on standardized testing has caused considerable collateral damage in too many schools, including narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, reducing love of learning,

pushing students out of school, driving excellent teachers out of the profession, and undermining school climate (5); and

WHEREAS, high-stakes standardized testing has negative effects for students from all backgrounds, and especially for low-income students, English language learners, children of color, and those with disabilities (6); and

WHEREAS, the culture and structure of the systems in which students learn must change in order to foster engaging school experiences that promote joy in learning, depth of thought and breadth of knowledge for students (7); therefore be it

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education requests that the Secretary of Education reexamine public school accountability systems in this state, and to develop a system based on multiple forms of assessment which does not require extensive standardized testing, more accurately reflects the broad range of student learning, and is used to support students and improve schools; and

RESOLVED, that the Vermont State Board of Education calls on the United States Congress and Administration accordingly amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as the "No Child Left Behind Act"), reduce the testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality in accountability, and not mandate any fixed role for the use of student test scores in evaluating educators; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education calls on other state and national organizations to act in concert with these goals to improve and broaden educational goals, provide adequate resources, and ensure a high quality education for all children of the state and the nation.

SOURCES FOR RESOLUTION ON HIGH-STAKES TESTING

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